DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 166 691 CS 204 511

AUTHOR Naugle, Helen H.
TITLE An Account of Georgia's Experience with the Regents' English Test.
PUB DATE [77]
NOTE 20p.; Study prepared at Georgia Institute of Technology

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Standards; *Composition (Literary); *Educational Accountability; *English Instruction; Essay Tests; Evaluation Criteria; Higher Education; Literacy; *Minimum Competency Testing; School Responsibility; *Testing Programs; *Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Georgia

ABSTRACT

To assure that students graduating from the institutions of higher education in Georgia possess basic academic literacy, an essay test was devised to provide system-wide information on the status of student competence in the areas of reading and writing and to identify those students who do not attain the expected levels of competence. The statewide emphasis on writing has produced both positive and negative results. The examination has caused a positive concentration on the teaching of writing in all academic areas, a stress on the composition training and background of newly hired teachers, the allotment of more money to the English departments of various institutions, and built-in motivation for student writing improvement. In addition, the test provides the teacher with helpful instructional materials such as topics for classroom writing, an objective scoring sheet that helps students evaluate their writing, and sample essays for class discussion. Some of the disadvantages of the test are its emphasis on mechanical rather than creative writing, an increased use of departmental exams that are graded by more than one faculty member, and possible evaluations of students and teachers based on statistical results rather than on an understanding of the situation. (MAI)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED166691

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

An Account of Georgia's Experience with the Regents' English Test

Helen H. Naugle, Professor of English

Georgia Institute of Technology

Atlanta, Georgia 30332

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Helen H. Naugle

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

CS204511

An Account of Georgia's Experience with the Regents' English Test

In these days of accountability, testing cannot be overemphasized. At least legislators, school board members, chancellors, and other administrative people, as well as the general public, seem to think so. With the mounting concern over signs of declining scholastic achievement and alleged deterioration of educational standards, a national trend toward competency testing has skyrocketed. The New York Times (August 17, 1977, 5:1) reports that in the last two years twenty-four states have adopted some sort of minimum competency requirements for high school graduation and many others are exploring the possibility. (See also New York Times, February 20, 1977.) Dr. Owen B. Kiernan, Executive Director of the National Association of Secondary Schools Principals, predicts that all fifty states will require students to pass minimum competency tests in reading, writing, and mathematics within the next eighteen months (New York Times, November 23, 1977, 18:4). HEW Department Secretary Joseph A. Califano, Jr. has endorsed minimum competency testing. In a speech delivered before the annual meeting of the College Entrance Examination Board in San Francisco he cited indications of declining academic achievement and held that testing would be an important tool for charting and improving the process of education. (New York Times, October 25, 1977, 23:1). Though he feels strongly that competency testing should remain under local and state control, Rep. Ronald M. Mott's bill for a federally sponsored minimum competency program, including testing, has received official endorsement from

legislators and state boards of education in thirty-seven states (New York Times, October 25, 1977, 23:1). Educational testing is big business. It grew rapidly in the United States during and after World War I until in 1973 the standardized testing industry reported an income of more than $100 million (Goodrich, 1975, p. 23). Though a nationwide controversy is going on over the value of this testing in American schools, in 1974 over 40,000,000 school children were given tests at a cost to the taxpayer of over $250,000,000--a large bite out of school budgets ("What's Wrong," 1976, p. 348). In the same year more than 631,000 standardized tests were administered in the Atlanta Public Schools alone, and Detroit school children took more than 400,000 tests (Goodrich, p. 23). No wonder the National Education Association Task Force found an "over-kill" of tests (What's Wrong," p. 349). Nevertheless, the Task Force admits that "some form of testing is indispensable for the improvement of instruction" and other areas of concern. Though they admit that "measurement is necessary for schooling," they add, "Let us not rely on standardized tests . . . . teachers are apprehensive about tests when school districts hold them accountable for student progress on the basis of test scores." Indeed "Tests do not necessarily measure what teachers teach or children learn." ("What's Wrong," p. 349). As part of the effort to provide English teachers with information on testing, the National Council of Teachers of English published COMMON SENSE AND TESTING IN ENGLISH: REPORT OF THE TASK FORCE ON MEASUREMENT AND EVALUATION IN THE STUDY OF ENGLISH. This NCTE Task

Force analyzes the present state of the art of testing and recommends the use of common sense in selecting and using tests and in interpreting the information derived from testing (Barth, 1976, p. 90). (See also NCTE Council-grams, March 1977, for a summary of the objections and cautions by some of the professional organizations.) Testers and teachers are warned of possible lawsuits arising from state testing programs.

Though Richard Lloyd-Jones (University of Iowa) and Ross Winterowd (University of Southern California) try to allay some concerns about the decline in test scores on writing assessment and present what they consider to be the five chief reasons for the decline (Barth, p. 87), Robert Shaker suggests that the development of the National Assessment of Education Programs was partly a result of the public's growing concern about the quality of education. This National Assessment gave rise to the development of statewide testing programs. Currently, most state legislatures have bills under consideration for "systems approaches" to accountability; as a result, teachers throughout the country are being asked by their state department of education, by regional accrediting associations, and by school districts to develop a performance-based curriculum in English (Barth, p. 88). On December 8, 1975, NEWSWEEK published a cover story on "Why Johnny Can't Write" which fueled a controversy that concerns every English teacher (Barth, p. 88). Partly because of the appallingly low grades on the state mandated college competency tests and partly because of the reasons that prompted the

national trend, all of Georgia's schools now have adopted minimal competency exams in selected grades - 3rd, 8th, and 11th.

Though the Powers That Be are demanding competency testing, the method of testing is not so well defined, nor are the method of grading, the practical use, and the impact of these tests. These are some problems that we as classroom teachers must deal with in relation to mandated testing. To shed first-hand information on these problems, some testimonials by teachers in Georgia's state-supported colleges and some personal experiences and reactions to the philosophy, procedure, and results of the Georgia Regent's Examination (which has been in effect since 1969) are here compiled.

With so much publicity devoted to Why Johnny Can't Read and Why Johnny Can't Write, most Georgians feel good that they have a compulsory English grammar and composition test which college students must pass before they can receive their diploma. The Regents believe that "it is the responsibility of each Institute of the University System of Georgia to assure the other institutions, and the System as a whole, that students obtaining a degree from that institution possess the basic competence of academic literacy, that is, certain minimum skills of reading and writing" (Rentz and Steller, 1976, p. 2). To help attain this goal the Georgia Regent's Examination was developed. Its objectives are "(1) to provide System-wide information on the status of student competence in the areas of reading and writing; and (2) to provide a uniform means of identifying those students who fail to attain minimum

levels of competence expected of graduates in the areas of reading and writing" (Rentz and Steller, p. 2). This examination has gained national attention. Last year inquiries about it were received from fourteen states, two regional groups, and one European group. A unique feature of the examination is the essay. The fact that the College Board has just revised its examination to include an essay further attests to the importance of performance in determining ability to write. It is more than a literacy test. Style, as well as fundamental basic mechanics, is taken into consideration. Adequate paragraph development, logic, effective and varied sentence structure, precise diction are also evaluated. So mature thinking, planning, and writing are demanded. But in general, organization, rhetoric, and mechanics are the three major areas of concern. Directions on the examination instruct students thus:

> Organization of your essay is important. Think toward a good thesis sentence, some specific supporting points, and a definite conclusion. In general, the passing essay will require that you (1) state and develop a central idea; (2) have an organization which is indicative of an overall plan; (3) deal with the assigned topic; and (4) avoid serious errors in diction, sentence structure, and paragraph development.

The composition and administration of the exam are briefly as follows: It is totally an in-house enterprise. The Georgia State

Legislature backed it; the Chancellor of the Georgia University System demanded it, and Dr. Robert Rentz of the Georgia Testing Department supervised the writing and administration of it. The University System Academic Committee on English supplies the topics for compositions, and it selects models for a paper to represent each grade level.

The examination is given each quarter at every state-sponsored college in Georgia to students who have completed a minimum of 45 hours. The compositions are graded at regional centers over the state by college teachers from each region. (The teachers grade voluntarily on two Saturdays for a modest honorarium).

Each paper is graded by three readers who do not know what grade the other readers assigned, nor do they know who wrote the paper or what school the paper is from. The paper, then, receives as a final grade the average of these three grades. (A referee determines wide splits in grades.)

A list of the percent of failures from each school is sent to the President of every participating college. Also the grader's record of agreement (or disagreement) is published.

Not much attention is paid to the graders' percentage of agreement, but much attention is given to the number of failures from each school.

One small junior college was "put on the map" when it rated no failures on the Regents' examination. People came from far and wide to consult and observe this school's English Department. Members of the

department even published a text on how to teach composition! So the test makes a notable impact.

In our school, about all the president is aware of regarding the English Department is how many students fail the Regents' Examination. The matter is even aired in Academic Senate and General Faculty meetings.

Such notoriety is both good and bad. As a result of the examination more concentration has been placed on writing. As one teacher in the system put it: "Even though the Regents' Exam emphasizes minimal values, and thus tends to lower and democratize expectations perhaps too far, the overwhelming effect has been positive. In the past, it was simply too easy (and far more fun) to ignore minimal standards of literacy in favor of literature exclusively. This neglect is no longer possible; it should never have been possible."[1]

This emphasis on writing is perhaps a universal result of the examination. For example, at Georgia Tech, we even dropped writing about literature in preference to a course designed for emphasis on writing.[2] The basic question governing the Curriculum Committee's deliberations is: "What course will enable students to pass the Regents' Exam?" Even those schools that have not changed their curricula have changed their focus to writing. One teacher responded to the question, "What have been the effects of the Regents' Examination on Curriculum?": "More emphasis on writing fundamentals." Another warned, "A necessary exam, but teachers should not just 'teach for the Regents'." And another said:

"There has been no real effect on the teaching of the two freshman courses at Kennesaw. We have always emphasized the aspects of writing covered by the exam, including in-class writing assignments. A general effect, however, and a good one is that writing has become a greater concern of all teachers." This person underlined all. The emphasis here summarizes the main impact of the exam. All freshman English teachers now stress composition.

This stress on composition has affected hiring. Department Heads look for candidates' training and background for teaching composition now as never before.

Composition teachers are respected and revered as much as Shakespeare teachers, maybe more. At least, they are getting more attention, and in some cases are getting jobs quicker. New competency-based certification examinations are being developed for certifying composition teachers. For a discussion on proficiency-certification programs, see New York Times, March 2, 1977, II, 8:1. The National Council of Teachers of English has set up a task force to look into the matter of certification for composition teachers, and the Conference on College Composition and Communication has a committee to look into the feasibility of setting up an accrediting agency. (Though many of us may not approve of such certification examinations, at least we delight in the focus placed on composition.) Administrators are giving more money to English departments to hire composition teachers. Also much money is allotted to remedial work for those who fail the exam. The Regents

require that every state-supported college in Georgia have a formal remedial program and that special instruction be provided for students who fail the exam. Writing teachers have become "somewhat more useful in the students' eyes." As one teacher noted: "The syllabus for English 1001 and the one for English 1002 have not changed. We do now, however, have a special course emphasizing only writing for those who fail the Regents' Test."

Not only special courses are provided for failures of the test but elaborate labs, innovative techniques, and self-paced methods of instruction have sprung up all over the state. People are thinking, working creating--trying to cut down on or avoid failures on the Regents' Examination.

At first, the test was taken lightly by many students. Some scoffed at it; some handed in blank paper; some made it a laughing matter, but after many students were actually denied graduation because they had not passed the Regent's Exam, word got around that the exam is a serious matter. Now it affords built-in motivation. As one teacher stated: "The students seem to respond a bit better if they know they must eventually pass the test." Another teacher protests: "I do not 'teach for the test.'" She then adds: "I use the test as motivation for the assignments I think are valid. I use the testing program idea as a topic for discussion in my efforts to establish a working relationship with students."

The test also provides helpful instruction material. The theme topics afford a ready supply for classroom writing and for aids to teaching. Examples of some topics are:

1. "Let every man make known what kind of government would command his respect, and that will be one step toward obtaining it." What kind of government would command your respect?
2. Describe the influence that advertising has had on your life and the lives of your friends. Be as specific as you can.
3. There has been increasing discussion of the existence of a "generation gap" separating the young and the old today. Does your own experience indicate that a generation gap exists?
4. If you were asked to make a fair evaluation of your teachers, what criteria or standards would you use for the evaluation?
5. What influence should students have in the determination of college policies?
6. How does your public image differ from your private self?
7. In what ways has the automobile been harmful as well as beneficial to our society?

8. Is it justifiable for the U.S. to spend millions of dollars on the exploration of space? Why or why not?
9. How has your attitude toward your home (either town or family) changed between the time you entered college and now?
10. Discuss two or three major problems in education today.

One teacher described her use of test materials in the classroom thus: "I use these for discussion of (a) how to pre-write, (b) methods of development, (c) how to read an assignment carefully, (d) how to write for a specific audience, and (e) how to relate an assignment to one's own experience and knowledge."

The scoring sheet is another teaching aid. One teacher uses it as a "source for explanation to students of how an instructor arrives at a grade for a paper." This is important since students often complain about subjectivity in theme grading and fuzzy bases for their grade. The instructions are:

> The "4" essay clearly and effectively states a thesis that relates directly to the assigned topic. The essay concentrates on this central idea and has a clear overall organizational plan. The major points in the essay are developed logically and are supported with concrete, specific evidence or detail that will arouse the reader's interest. The essay should reveal the writer's ability to select effective, appropriate words and phrases, to construct and

organize sentences and paragraphs, to make careful use of effective transitional devices, and to maintain a consistent, appropriate tone. The essay should also be free from mechanical errors.

The "3" essay should have a clearly stated central idea which is logically and adequately developed, and it should contain most of the qualities of good writing itemized above. The essay generally differs from those which would be assigned a "4" in that it shows definite competence, but lacks real distinction; the examples and details may be pertinent, but not particularly interesting or sharply observed; the word choice may be consistently accurate, but seldom--if ever--really felicitous.

The grade of "2" is assigned to those papers which meet only the basic criteria, and those in a minimal way. The essay must present a central idea with sufficient clarity so that the reader is clearly aware of the writer's purpose, and the organization must be sufficiently clear for the reader to perceive how the author plans to achieve that purpose. The essay should offer some supporting evidence or details to substantiate the points that are made, but these may be rather scant. The essay should clearly indicate that the writer has some sense of what a sentence and a paragraph are and that he can generally use words accurately. The essay will probably contain several

mechanical errors, but they should not be of sufficient severity or frequency to destroy the sense of what the writer is saying.

The essay which receives a "1" indicates the author's failure to: (1) state and develop a central idea; (2) have an organization which is indicative of an overall plan; (3) deal with the assigned topic; or (4) avoid serious errors in diction, sentence structure, and paragraph development.

The sample essays, too, are valuable teaching aids. After I go over the criteria for an excellent paper, a fair paper, and a failing paper, I show on the opaque projector samples of each paper. Since these papers are student papers, all on the same subject, students can see in sharp focus what makes a good paper as opposed to a bad one. These papers provide lively discussion and keen insights.

More meaningful testing is taking place as a result of the Regents' Examination. Practice Regents' exams are being given at the beginning of school for placement of students and for diagnosis. In many schools, the exam is an exit requirement from remedial studies and/or English 1001 and English 1002. "Trial-run" tests are given throughout the quarter with time devoted to teaching test-taking strategies.

In spite of all of these advantages, the impact of the Regents' Examination has not been all good. Controversy arises over its effects on creativity, testing techniques, and grading practices among other things. Perhaps the greatest disadvantage is the emphasis on mechanical

writing. As one teacher says: "The Regents' essay has forced me to stay on top of writing skills in all my English classes, so that would be an advantage. A disadvantage is that the emphasis is on mechanical, routine correctness rather than creativity. Creativity must be curbed, in fact, so that the Regents' essay is, for good students, a deadening influence." Another responded in the same vein: "The effect has been restrictive, forcing too much emphasis on the rigidly organized paper." And another confirms, "Less stress is upon good writing sometimes." Many teachers even maintain that the exam leads to mediocrity. As one teacher put it, the effects have been "Negative! Too much emphasis on minimal literacy - mediocrity!! Lowered the quality of material taught." Another teacher sees the same weakness, but with a redeeming feature, " . . . the Regents' Examination has had a detrimental effect in that it has caused the narrowing of goals in composition - at least there has been a strong impetus to do so. I'm talking about teaching people to pass instead of teaching them to write. On the other hand, it has attracted attention to the inefficiency of teaching English, something that teachers have learned to be complacent about." The curriculum and methods of teaching composition that have resulted from the Regents's Examination are truly not stimulating to the gifted student.

Another effect of the exam which may be termed a disadvantage is an increased use of departmental exams graded by more than one faculty member. An irate teacher views these consequent department exams thus:

"Because of the Regents, Floyd Junior College instituted the 'Departmental,' which the student has to pass in order to pass the freshman composition course. In other words, some instructor gets to violate the integrity of the course by flunking some other instructor's student." Departmental exams are seldom popular with either faculty or students.

The effect of the exam on evaluation of faculty is equivocal. One teacher approves its effect on faculty evaluation saying: "The Regents' Exam has imposed accountability standards on writing, making measurement of course success where it ought to be--on writing competency." Another speaks of the exam's reflection on the teacher thus: "Faculty are given the results of the performance of their students on the Regents' Exam--no conclusions are drawn, as the charts are there for the faculty members' information--this has made instructors more careful about who is recommended to take the exam." However another teacher disagrees with the statement, "no conclusions are drawn," by declaring: "Division chairmen follow results rather closely." But a third teacher thinks: "Student performance on this test is not seen as closely reflecting faculty teaching ability." Another sees the effects extending to administrators' evaluations of teachers: "It encourages administrators to make evaluations based on statistical results rather than on an understanding of the situation." Another hopes administrators' evaluations of teachers is not affected but fears it is: "God! I hope the exam doesn't affect administrators evaluation of teachers at all. I suspect it might!" One teacher notes how the

results reach beyond individual instruction: "The percentage of students passing the Regents' Exam reflects upon the teaching effectiveness of the English Department." The effect on evaluation of faculty might best be summed up by the teacher who said: "While instructors, in general, are held accountable for ultimate performance of students, there has been no great effect on faculty evaluation."

Also equivocal is the evidence regarding grading practices and standards. Some say grading has not been affected at all; some say standards for grading in-class essays are lower; some, higher. One teacher stated his reaction to the grading practices thus: "Though there is no 'scientific evidence,' I believe that the examination has made us tighten up our grading practices--no teacher likes to learn that a student to whom he gave a high grade has flunked the examination." This opinion is universal.

But all in all, the impact of the exam might be summed up in the words of one teacher who outlined the consequences thus: "(1) Clearer delineation of teaching, (2) better organized instruction, (3) better student writing, (4) accountability improved, (5) less illiteracy. Impact all good!"

Whether the impact is all good, all bad, or equivocal, the impact is resounding, especially in the areas of instruction, staffing, and teaching techniques.

Footnotes

[1] Testimonials will not be documented because most respondents prefer anonymity. Teachers in all types of state-supported colleges in Georgia are quoted.

[2] This first-quarter freshman English course uses Donald Hall, Writing Well (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976) 2nd ed.

Reference Notes

1. The New York Times, August 17, 1977, 5:1.

2. The New York Times, February 20, 1977.

3. The New York Times, November 23, 1977, 18:4.

4. The New York Times, October 25, 1977, 23:1.

5. Goodrich, J. N., "America Standardized Tests; Pseudo-Indicators of Ability?" Educational Technology, December 1975, 15, no. 12, pp. 23-25.

6. "What's Wrong with Standardized Testing?" Intellect, February 1976, 104, no. 2371, pp. 347-349.

7. Barth, R. J., "Notes and Quotes on Back to Basics," English Journal, November 1976, 65, 87-90.

8. National Council of Teachers of English, Council-grams, March 1977.

9. Newsweek, December 8, 1975.

10. Ainsworth, D., "Examining the Basics for Competency-based Education." Journal of Higher Education, May/June 1977, 48, no. 3, pp. 331-335.

11. Della-Piana, G.; Odell, L.; Cooper, C., and Endo, G., "The Writing Skills Decline: So What?" Educational Technology, July 1975, 16, 30-39.

12. The New York Times, August 20, 1977, 19:1.

13. Rentz, R. and Steller, N. Unpublished "Documentation Related to the Regents's Testing Program," August, 1976, p. 2. (Available at author's address: Box 868, Ga. State U., U. Plaza, Atlanta, GA.)